

AMERICAN ART

PAINTING • SCULPTURE • ARCHITECTURE
DECORATIVE ARTS • PHOTOGRAPHY

BY
MILTON W. BROWN

Executive Officer, Doctoral Program in Art History, City University of New York

SAM HUNTER

Professor, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University

JOHN JACOBUS

Chairman, Department of Art, Dartmouth College

NAOMI ROSENBLUM

Instructor in Art History, Brooklyn College

DAVID M. SOKOL

*Chairperson of the History of Architecture and Art Department,
University of Illinois/Chicago Circle*

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The Dematerialized Object

In the late 1960s art in America and throughout the world began to expand its range of possibilities to unforeseen limits. The idea of a more flexible art seemed broad enough to include vast Earthworks projects, literally covering miles of terrain, videotape events, a series of photographs of parking lots, or cornflakes scattered in an open urban area. Art could be a computerized drawing of a nude or a web of laser beams covering three city blocks. It could be grease, dirt, leaves, or ice blocks melting on a gallery floor, or it could be merely verbal statements and print. All these kinds of art, whether modestly understated or spectacular, had acquired their own stylistic labels—"Land Art," "Performance Art," "Body Art," "Process Art," or whatever. What unites them is the drastic change from tradition that has been recognized under a number of more general rubrics, among them "Post-Studio Art" and "Conceptual Art."

The change in the nature of the work of art and in the way we regard its ultimate value came, to some extent, as a reaction to the commercialism of the art scene in the sixties, when the market for some paintings in fashion reached a peak of inflated prices and falsified values. In that atmosphere the new avant-garde began to demand that art no longer be treated as a commodity but find support in society as a self-justifying activity of intrinsic worth to the human spirit and to our scheme of civilized values. This sort of idealism and protest is not uncommon among artists, but only recently has there been a determination to create a dematerialized or nonobject art, freed from collectibility and profiteering by resale.

At the same time a change also took place in the structure of the art world. About 1967 nonobject art sprang up independently in several countries, and with it the transmission of art today has become truly global. Little time or energy is needed to transport entire exhibitions of statements by the artist (videotapes, photographs, and the like) anywhere in the world; and no particular exhibition center is required, since the work can exist simultaneously in various places. Furthermore, most of the artists concerned are extremely articulate, so that they

need not await critical approval to sanction their efforts or make their work exportable.

The rapidity of artistic change in the 1960s was unusual even in a period accustomed to the swift dispersal of outmoded styles into inglorious obsolescence. The accelerated pace of innovation may have reflected the widespread sense of social despair and of governmental incapacity to halt wars or assure human survival in the poisoned atmosphere of planet earth. This new mood of global pessimism probably contributed to artistic innovation and the uninhibited risk-taking apparent on all sides.

"Conceptual" and "Environmental" art developed directly from structuralist and Minimal sculpture of the 1960s. By the close of that decade, a remarkable variety of new sculpture and other three-dimensional forms had challenged the dominance of painting. Sculpture had so extended traditional definitions of medium that it could, with validity, be discussed as dust, literature, accident, nature, scientific illustration, theater, dance, or pedagogy. Increasingly, the articulated volumes or the physical presence traditionally associated with a sculptured object was abandoned in favor of a process in time, a performance, an idea, or an action, rather than a stable and tangible physical structure.

An example of the ephemeral physical object was Christo's *Running Fence* (1976, colorplate 102), a 24.5-mile-long, 18-foot-high translucent fabric fence erected by students, supervised by engineers, in northern California. Like so many of Christo's ambitious "packagings," whether of buildings or of landscape, the point of this temporary monument, which was dismantled after two weeks, was to widen public consciousness of the nature of art outside the museum context. The result was a financially extravagant work of spectacular beauty, undulating like a line drawing on a titanic scale in the changing light of the California landscape. But it also had significant sociological content, in bringing together so many elements of the planning of a contemporary art work in progress, with a direct effect on the lives of landowners, engineers, public officials, students, and casual observers.

THE CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

A German artist who has long worked in the United States, Hans Haacke, was one of the first to signal the significant change from object-making, which involved material processes, to the study and presentation of process and "systems" themselves in a purely conceptual approach (plate 632). As early as 1963 Haacke had conceived of new applications of the idea of "systems" to art and to natural phenomena, which he subjected to conditions of change in permissive environmental situations. Having abandoned the illusionism and willed artifice of conventional art, he turned to the forces of nature as his prime subject or "system." He was first known for his indoor "condensation boxes." Reacting to changing temperature conditions, these transparent cubes produced a continuous condensation of a little distilled water; the ever-varied patterns of droplets forming on the interior Plexiglas surfaces of his boxes became visible graphs of these conditions. His critical involvement with time and with patterns of physical transformation became an increasingly important factor in "Earth Art," "Process Art," and the emerging "Conceptual Art." The interest in systems (whether physical, biological, cybernetic, or finally societal) later continued with Haacke's serial photographs of seagulls and other natural phenomena.

Haacke also proposed a museum show listing property

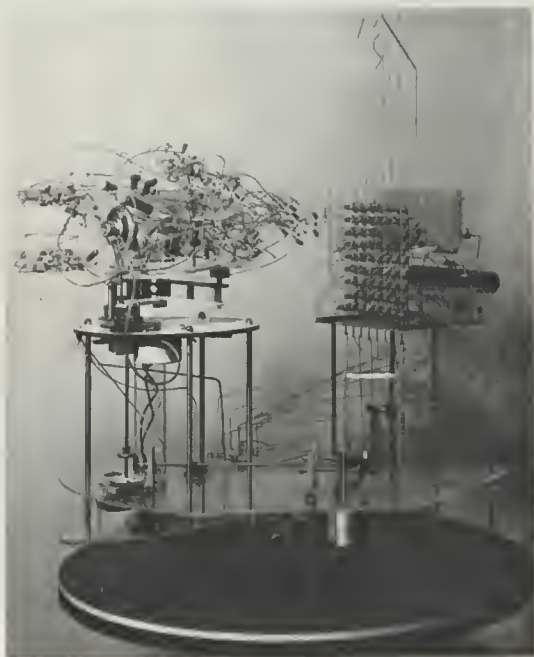
holdings in Manhattan, with photographs of slum and middle-class real estate—a system which inevitably would have revealed the interlocking character of ownership and might have embarrassed some church groups implicated as slumlords. Another recent exhibition contained pointed social ironies in presenting pious public-relations statements by well-known business leaders of corporations with aspirations to support the arts.

To an extraordinary degree, the last years of the 1960s saw idea rather than physical mass or visual definition become the controlling feature of art. Sol LeWitt (b. 1929) described the idea as "the machine that makes the work." The artist's aim, he wrote, is "not to instruct the viewer, but to give him information. Whether the viewer understands this information is incidental to the artist." The object became the visual residue or end product of a highly calculated and rationalized action. Much of the traditional satisfaction with sensuous form and structured composition was replaced by the pleasure of almost blindly working out an intellectual problem. Despite the value placed on cerebral process, the character of the end product nevertheless remained, in LeWitt's words, "intuitive."

Although probably best known for his austere, Minimalist sculptures (plate 633), LeWitt also began in the late 1960s to design influential large wall drawings, ex-



632 Hans Haacke. *The Good Will Umbrella*. 1976. Wall-mounted placards, reproduction, and text. John Weber Gallery, New York.



643 James Seawright. *Watcher*, 1965–66.
Metal, plastic, electronic parts, height 37".
Collection Howard and Jean Lipman, New York

nology (EAT). The new development had actually begun two years earlier, with a series of brilliant performance spectacles organized by Klüver, Rauschenberg, dancers Yvonne Rainer, Alex Hay, and Steve Paxton, and the composer John Cage, among others. *Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering* was presented in the fall of 1966 at the Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory in New York, the same one that had once held the Armory Show. There, participating artists and engineers invented a remote-control dance piece, self-performing musical machines, and infrared-ray television cameras which managed to reveal and transmit onto an enormously magnified video screen images of members of the audience performing simple activities on cue in the dark. With the success of *Nine Evenings*, EAT was established and the flowering of environmental and mixed-media art in the United States assured.

John Cage was the guru of the new environmentalism, for his electronic music had been intimately involved with technology since the 1940s. He had already composed music with radios, amplifiers, oscillators, contact microphones, and even sounds picked up from outer space. One of the memorable performances at *Nine Evenings* was the piece entitled *Bandoneon*, on which David Tudor collaborated with Cage. They left an ensemble of programmed and responsive audio circuits, moving loudspeakers, television images, and lights to make their own random music when activated by the audience, thus creating one of America's first autonomous artistic

machines. Such works-of-art-cum-robots were later developed by innumerable American visual artists who acquired familiarity with sophisticated electronic technology, transistors, and microcircuitry.

James Seawright created sculptures whose movements, electronic sounds, and light projections were generated by a visible circuitry that became part of the work's aesthetic (plate 643). He had described these autonomous machines as "sculpture that happens also to be a machine." Howard Jones also created lights and reflecting surfaces which the spectator activated both intentionally and unknowingly. Electronic technology made possible for the first time responsive environments and complex machines of this kind, set in motion by external environmental stimuli. Some of the early experiments of GRAV provided the models in the plastic arts for the American experiments.

Modern European precedents for such environmental art included the loose arrangements of collage materials in Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* environments and El Lissitzky's Constructivist *Proun* Rooms, which he called "the junction from architecture to painting." Closer at hand, Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* in 1961 recreated the interior of a Lower East Side store as an ironic commentary on derelict commercial culture. Allan Kaprow, the inventor of Happenings, had been drawn to Jackson Pollock's paintings as sources of energy that expanded the individual creator's private world into an activated space, engaging the spectator at new psychic and perceptual levels.

The environmental art that emerged in the mid-1960s contained a multitude of sensory phenomena—visual, aural, kinetic, and sometimes olfactory. Many of the most theatrical environments were essentially light shows, or entertainments, which tried to build an overload of sight and sound designed to disorient the senses, like a drug experience. A familiar and standard example was the euphoric light environments contrived by USCO (US Company of Garnerville), with flashing slide projections, pulsating strobe lights, Mylar sheets, and other devices which created heightened sensations and finally total immersion in an active field of pulsating sight and sound. A torrent of slide projections accompanied by high-decibel rock music made Andy Warhol's *Balloon Farm*, *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, and the *Electric Circus* among the most popular ventures in discotheque multimedia of the 1960s. With visual imagery changing too rapidly to be followed coherently, and ear-splitting musical sound, the spectator experienced a sense of identity loss within the irresistibly energized room enclosure.

The character of artistic environments began to change markedly at the end of the decade. Robert Whitman's electronic environment *Pond* (plate 644) represents the shift to a more meditative mood. He was one of the pioneers in the early group of performance artists who



644 Robert Whitman. *Pond*. Environment photographed at the Jewish Museum, New York, in 1968. Lights, aluminum, plastic, electronic speakers. Dismantled

created the original Happenings. However, he went beyond them and beyond his mentor, Allan Kaprow, in utilizing technology and media as art materials. More recently, his art has paralleled other developments in intermedia works of a more abstract, cerebral, and self-consciously conceptual nature.

The electronic environment *Pond*, which has since been dismantled, incorporated eight vibrating concave Mylar mirrors, strobe lights, slide projectors, and a continuous tape-loop sound system repeating a sequence of single words and phrases of a banal character. The room was dark, but the viewer could make himself out in the mirrors. The oscillation of surface, sound, and light continually altered his perceptions in a mystifying manner. The experience was thus enigmatic and tended to move the viewer inward, into himself rather than outside to the world. This type of gentle narcissism, later to be amplified in different ways by the self-obsessed, erotic Polaroid imagery of Lucas Samaras (plate 645) and the energetic, more violent body works of Acconci and Nauman, attenuated the environmental impulse.

The Pula collaborative, a group of seven artists from Oxford, Conn., created extensive zones of sound, pulsating light, and heat out of doors, on golf courses (plate 646), and at the Museum of Modern Art garden. Pula's activities depended on chance stimuli in the environment interacting reciprocally with computer programming, and responding to such factors as human presence, traffic, and weather conditions. The group described their work as the "first . . . conceived on a scale and system of today." These sound and light performances show concern not only with immediate impact on the spectator but with ecology, both rural and urban, and even with the underlying rhythms of society itself.

The contemporary artist's interest in technology has inevitably led to ambitious and expensive collaborations within the industrial corporate structure. Art-conscious corporations have expanded the variety of types of assistance offered artists, which range from advice on materials to elaborate programs involving residence for creative individuals within industry. New synthetic materials have also significantly expanded the possibilities

645 Lucas Samaras. *Autopolaroids*. 1971. Polaroid prints, each $4\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$ ". Pace Gallery, New York





646 Palsa Group (Oxford, Conn.). *Yale Golf Course Work*.
Environment photographed in New Haven, Conn., in 1969



647 Ernest Trova. *Study: Falling Man*. 1966.
Polished silicone bronze and enamel, length 72".
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

of expression in painting and sculpture (see Chapters 23, 26).

The hybrid figures of Ernest Trova (b. 1927), which combine esoteric apparatuses and blandly generalized human figures in gleaming metals, are perhaps the most notable contemporary examples in sculpture of space-age imagery and technology, transcending even the cold perfection of Detroit aesthetics (plate 647).

Collaborations between artists and industry on a grand scale have been imaginative and bold, even though the new alliance has rarely been completely successful.

Still guided by the engineer Billy Klüver, the Experiments in Art and Technology group has continued imaginatively using computer and electronic technology to develop new artistic imagery and often spectacular multimedia techniques. At the Pepsi-Cola Pavilion at the World's Fair of 1970 in Osaka, Japan, his group designed and engineered the artificial "environments" inside and outside the Pavilion, from the cloud that floated above the dome to the responsive sound, light, and mirror systems inside triggered by the movement of the spectators (plate 648).

One of the most interesting and philosophically satisfying investigations of industrial technology was provided by the *Software* exhibition in 1970 at the Jewish Museum, New York, organized by Jack Burnham. There were, admittedly, a number of serious malfunctions in some of the most engrossing pieces, such as the MIT architecture group's *Seek*, a project in which a computer moved toy blocks around in interaction with an unpredictable and agitated team of gerbils who inhabited the man-made and constantly shifting environment. Exhibits were presented as a means of handling and relaying information and establishing patterns of environmental interaction within a systems structure rather than as a set of autonomous art objects. It signaled a movement, according to the catalog, away from art objects and toward artistic "concerns with natural and man-made systems, processes, ecological relationships, and the philosophic involvement of Conceptual Art."

A profound shift in attitude has inspired the continuing flow of innovation by some of the most fertile minds in

American art in the 1970s. New conceptions of art as idea and action, as information rather than a product, and even as a general state of awareness, have proved their viability. One of the assumptions underlying the most adventurous art of the contemporary period is rooted in the rejection of the status quo in art as well as in emotions and politics. Like other revolutionary twentieth-century art movements, the succession of dominant trends from 1945 to the end of the 1970s, from Abstract Expressionism to environmental systems and Conceptualism, has been motivated by the ingrained experimentalism of all modern art. The avant-garde's restless tendency

to push ideas as far as possible, expanding the frontiers of artistic experience and individual consciousness, today continues to produce an unabated flow of significant art. The rate of major innovation and, perhaps, the stature of individuals of genius have diminished by comparison with some of the great names of the last few decades. Yet the energy level and the sheer numbers of serious, talented, and progressive artists today engaged in redefining the scope and meaning of the art enterprise is, if anything, more challenging intellectually and perceptually than it was thirty years ago, at the beginning of America's great postwar artistic renaissance.



648 Mirror dome at the Pepsi-Cola Pavilion, Expo '70, Osaka, Japan, designed by Robert Breer, Forrest Myers, David Tudor, and Robert Whitman of the Experiments in Art and Technology Group. A Shinto ceremony is taking place.